

Scripture: John 4:46-54

"WHO WILL HEAL OUR CHILDREN"

Text: John 4:49

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This passage introduces a new section in John's Gospel. Up to this point the theme had been the relation of the new Gospel to the old, the superiority of Christianity to the older religions. This was introduced by the changing of water to wine by Christ at the marriage at Cana of Galilee. We now enter a new section where we see the power of the Gospel and how we may appropriate it.

Again, this incident occurs in Cana of Galilee where Jesus performed the first "sign". It was a small Galilean village nestled in the highlands about 15 miles West of the Sea of Galilee.

At the same time there was a nobleman living about 20 miles away in the lake-side town of Capernaum. He was probably one of King Herod's officials. His son was at the point of death. Stories of Jesus' miracle at Cana must have been circulating throughout Galilee because when the official heard that Jesus had returned to Cana, he left Capernaum and journeyed up to beg him to come down and heal his son. Certainly if the stories were true about Jesus' ability to change water to wine, then he would be able to heal his son.

Young people today, are in much the same situation as the nobleman's son except the danger is not quite as evident. They are threatened by a spiritual death because they have no adequate or solid base on which to build their lives. Why do we wait until the danger becomes extreme before we search for a cure?

One reason is the predominance of what I would call utilitarian Christianity. The value of Christian faith is judged, not according to whether or not it is true, but according to its ability to cure some evil in society or assure its stability or to affect respectable behavior in the young people. It's the kind of faith Jesus was referring to when he said, "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe." The need for faith in Christ arises only when the situation becomes so extreme that disaster is imminent. Therefore, the nobleman saith unto him, "Sir, come down ere my child die."

This kind of faith evidences itself only in the signs and wonders that we are beginning to hear from those young people who are sometimes known as "Jesus Freaks". Young people who have come to faith in Christ when their lives were in danger of being destroyed by drugs or other abuse.

But the problem with that view of Christian faith which evidences itself only in terms of miraculous healings and conversions is that it has very little to say to the average person trying to live a good life. Because a good person will discover that he can live a good life, a socially respectable life, even an exemplary life without faith in Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Anyone who has even a cursory understanding of the great world religions knows that all of them try to enunciate their adherents with living good lives and doing good to others. There are large numbers of non-Christians and even atheists who live exemplary lives.

Many of us are satisfied with this result because we have a presupposition that the primary reason for Christian faith or any faith is to assure good behavior.

But anyone who is inquisitive will soon see through this distortion of Christian faith. If Christian faith is merely a method of social control, if its basis in fact and truth is irrelevant or secondary or not even considered, or if it is seen as just one religion along-side another, then it contains no absolute by which we can measure what goodness is or why we should behave a certain way rather than another. And if we have no absolute we might as well do as we please.

This result of course is unsatisfactory to us but in reality it is a much more rational approach given the view that the primary value of Christian faith is seen in its ability to affect good behavior. The person who does as he pleases is, at least acting consistently with his own presuppositions. The good person whose life is life without fault or Christ fools himself into believing that goodness has meaning apart from truth.

As a result our standard for measuring the health of our children is a false standard. If we measure the health of our children by their ability and willingness to conform to the popular consensus of what is good, then we don't consider our children to be seriously in trouble until they are threatened by those more violent or anti-social forms of death or delinquency such as exemplified in drugs or drinking. It is not until then that we judge the health of the child to be in jeopardy.

For that reason the solutions to their problems of the cause for their illness are usually only defensive. We look for remedies after the problems arise. We look for the cures after the sickness has reached crisis proportions.

Therefore, if a drug problem arises we set up a drug information center. It's only when we discover that young people have nothing to do that we try to remedy the situation by planning parties, dances, and special programs. Most of the programs offered by the churches, whether local or regional, are oriented towards providing socially accepted alternatives to the way a young person will use his time, without really providing any basis for the person to decide what makes something socially acceptable or unacceptable.

All of these solutions may be good and successful in terms of what they attempt to do, but they only deal with the symptoms of the illness.

So it is easy to identify with the nobleman who traveled the 20 miles by foot through the mountains seeking help for his son's life who was at the point of death. But it would have provided an interesting parallel had John included an incident of a father showing the same concern for his son's life when he was perfectly healthy. Nevertheless, John would have us understand that had his son been in perfectly good physical health he was still subject to a death of another sort. He would have still been in need of the life that only Christ can provide.

In saying this I realize that I am making a dogmatic statement. I know it sounds like a cliché which has no meaning to say that only by faith in Christ does one enter into life. Unless I explain what I mean we will be in danger of becoming involved in a simplistic approach to Christianity which reduces faith in Christ to the level of magic.

Young, as well as old are in need of the life that only Christ gives, not because there is any magical power in faith, but because life is dependent upon accepting the truth. One soon dies if he places his faith in what is not true. If Christ is who he claimed to be then all of us are absolutely dependent upon him alone for our health and salvation. And to live independent of faith in him is to cut ourselves off from life. If he was not who he claimed to be then it makes little difference whether or not we follow his ideals. Why should we?

Faith in Christ, therefore, means believing that He is who He claims to be, and He does what He promises. John makes a point of showing the correlation of the promise of Christ to the father and the healing of the man's son. "So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in which Jesus said unto him, thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house."

But faith in Christ is not merely an intellectual recognition that he is who he claims to be. Faith in Christ also has its outward affects. The text tells us that the nobleman believed the word and returned to Capernaum presumably assured that the miracle had been performed. The word "believe" saturates John's Gospel. It's interesting to note that the noun "belief" or "faith" never occurs in the Gospel of John in contrast to its many occurrences in the other Gospels.

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John never uses the noun. He invariably uses a verb or a verb form. For John being a believer is an active life of obedience to Christ. By using the verb he is stressing that faith is an active commitment to that which is true. For John, believing is not primarily seeing the truth, but obeying it.

It is only when we believe Christ to be who he claimed that we have an adequate standard to measure the health of a person. Without that belief we can not see the danger that they are in until we find ourselves to be in the situation of the nobleman asking Christ, "Sir, come down ere my child die."

The word used for die is used in two ways throughout the New Testament. It usually refers, as it does here, to natural physical death. But the Gospel of John nearly always uses the word figuratively of spiritual death.

John included this account for the healing of the nobleman's son for a specific reason. One must understand scripture within its context. Directly following this miracle Jesus restores the health of an old man who had been an invalid for 40 years. In placing the two miracles side by side John wanted to make a theological statement rather than to give a mere historical account of miscellaneous miracles. He wants to tell us that the young as well as old are subject to spiritual and physical death and live within its loom continually. Therefore both young and old are in need of the new life that Christ provides. This account therefore is a commentary or an illustration of one of the opening verses in John's Gospel, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

The word "life" is one of John's favorite words. Some Scholars have pointed out that this Gospel could very well be called the Gospel of life. John tells us later that the purpose of his Gospel is "that you may have life in his name."

The claim that God freely gives a new order of life to those who will humbly accept his gift is the heart of the New Testament message. When your children were baptized you made a promise to seek Christ, even as the nobleman did for the gift of new life for your children. Through faith in Christ as Lord and Savior you are to be the mediators of this life.

Unfortunately, false emphasises in the teaching of the church or popular misunderstandings have obscured the teaching of the New Testament and reduced the Christian religion to a moral struggle or a following of the example of Jesus with the help of prayer. But when we seek anything less than the new life found through faith in Christ we are seeking something that is sub-Christian.

For most of us who have been raised by Christian parents this new life comes quietly and unobtrusively so that it is hardly noticed. But when that new life heals the spiritual sickness of a person the signs become clearly discernible. There is a hunger for understanding what God has revealed in the Scripture; there is a painful sensitivity to our failure to keep God's law, yet there is an assurance that we have been reconciled to God; and there is a realization that Christ is a living person to whom we can pray.

The new life grows through months and years. There will be many falls and discouragements, as much as any child finds when it tries to crawl, walk, run, swim. There will almost certainly be one-sided growth at some stage--an immature enthusiasm or a claim to too much knowledge--just as with any growing person. Sometimes there will be revolt, like that of an adolescent who has to do so to test his convictions and establish his own identity. Almost certainly doubt and questioning will come, for that is the means of deeper understanding. The growth to maturity is gradual. But in spiritual life there is no growing old. When the body becomes fragile and exhausted, and even the mind loses its clarity, spiritual vitality and growth may continue.

It is a slow process and it is never complete in this life. God does not go about his new creation in a hurry, any more than he did the first. But he does recreate from within, until the qualities of the life of Christ, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self-control, are produced as spontaneously as fruit by a tree.

Will we fulfill our responsibilities by recognizing the danger that confronts our children and by securing for them a solid base on which they might build their lives, that base being faith in Christ as Lord and Savior?